Holocaust Project Focuses on the Individuals

North Salem, NY – The Global History classroom at North Salem High School has transformed into a butterfly garden, with beautifully illustrated paper butterflies suspended from the ceiling depicting colorful flowers, sunsets, birds, and barbed wire.

“Each butterfly represents a story of the children who died during the Holocaust,” said sophomore Jenna Andrews. “This poem is about children being torn away from their homes. All they want to do is go back home but they can’t because there is nothing there.”

Alison Vara gave each of her sophomore students a different poem, selected from a compilation of children’s poetry written during the Holocaust. The students analyzed the meaning of their poems and then commemorated the author’s life by illustrating a paper butterfly using imagery and text from the poem.

“We’ve studied the rise of Hitler and the beginning of the persecution,” said Vara. “These butterflies will hang in our classroom through our study of the war until we reach liberation. The longer that the butterflies stay up, the more we connect with them and the people they represent.”

Inspired by the poem “I Never Saw Another Butterfly” written by Pavel Friedmann, a young Czech imprisoned in the Terezin Concentration Camp, the Holocaust Museum Houston founded the Butterfly Project. The museum eventually collected 1.5 million paper butterflies, one for each child who perished in the Holocaust.

“I used to mail our butterflies to the museum,” said Vara. “Since they’ve completed their collection, we’ve started keeping the butterflies. We hope to have a memorial here at North Salem someday.”

The scale of the project is already having an impact on her students. Pointing to a bulletin board display of butterflies, Matt Moia said, “If those were people, they would fill this classroom. That’s unimaginable.”
“It doesn’t seem real when we talk about 1.5 million children dying but reading these personal experiences helps,” said Izzy Halstead. “I started to think about 9/11 and how many people were affected. Then I look at the numbers of those who died in the Holocaust and it's impossible to imagine how many more were affected.”

“Holocaust education is all about the students. It’s about your generation learning and understanding about these events because, at some point in your future, you will be the teachers of these events,” said Vara to her class. “Our survivors are perishing. Their family members are now telling the stories so that their experiences are not forgotten.”

Vara hopes that looking at the Holocaust through the poets’ perspectives, her students will learn empathy for the human experience in war and honor a life lost. “It's important to understand that they were real people and to memorialize their life.”

“My poem is about kids who are trying to keep their minds away from what’s happening around them,” said AJ Sejfijaj. “It made me think about the war in Ukraine. Maybe the kids there are writing poems like this now.”